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THE CHICKADEE

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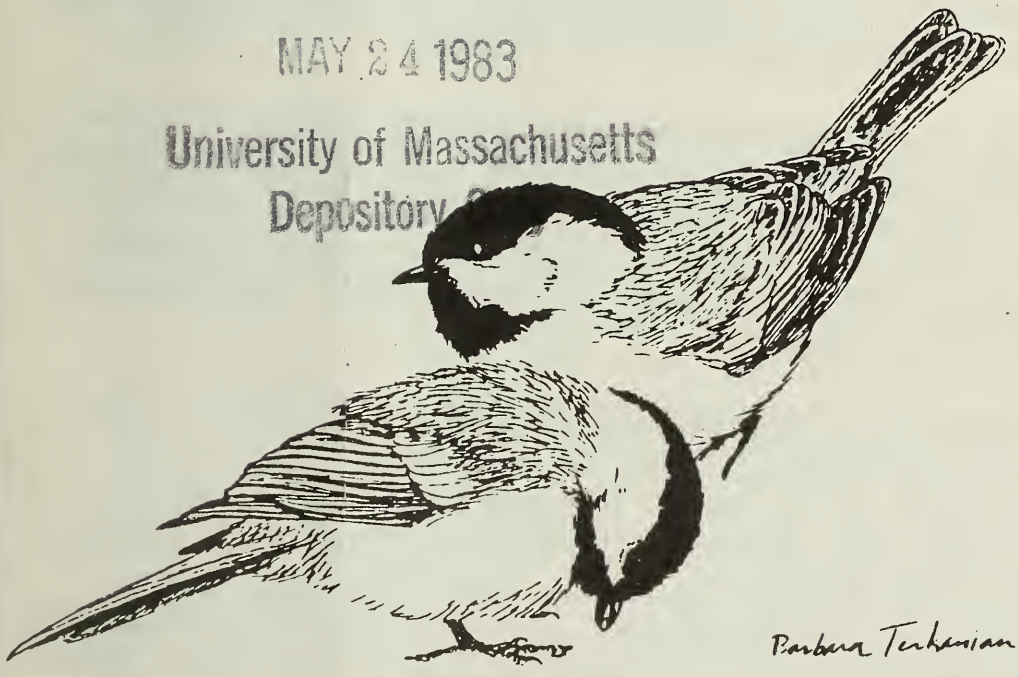

Barbara Terhanian

MASSACHUSETTS' STATE BIRD

824/188

The black-capped chickadee (Parus atricapillus) is certainly one of the most common birds in the Commonwealth and has been so since long before the first colonists arrived on these shores. To the people of the Crow tribes, the chickadee was, "least in strength but greatest in mind of its kind." To the Northern Cheyenne it hailed the coming of summer. To all it was known for its cheery pluckiness and its hardiness in withstanding New England winters.

A common resident in Massachusetts, the little black-capped chickadee is easy to distinguish from other small birds. It is the only little gray bird with a black cap, black bib and white cheeks and it readily approaches so closely that you can see them all. Sometimes you can identify it by its song a sprightly "chicka-dee-dee-dee" or a clearly whistled, "fee-bee-ee" often heard in spring.

As April approaches, the roving winter flocks disperse and the birds separate into scattered pairs which seek out and inspect potential nest sites in such relatively "open" situations as young forests, hedgerows, field borders or near deeper woods where they feed and rest.

Typically chickadees excavate a cavity in the center of a rotten birch or pine stump that is at least 10 cm in diameter and anywhere from 1 to 50 feet above the ground. Barely do they use a cavity prepared by another animal. When they do, they add their own excavations carefully carrying away any extra wood chips. The nest is then lined with moss, plant down, fur and feathers.

Sometime between the first week of May and the end of June, the female lays a clutch of anywhere from five to ten white eggs lightly speckled with brown. For about twelve days the adults take turns incubating the eggs and, when they hatch, both, both parents become involved in feeding the hatchlings.

It takes a lot of food to fill the ever-empty bellies of rapidly growing birds so the adults spend most of the summer in a frantic search for food to feed themselves and the many hungry mouths back at the nest. By about mid-August the fledgelings can fend for themselves and the pace slackens.

During this summer/fall period, the chickadees rely heavily on insects as food. They eat caterpillars, insect eggs and often full grown moths. To vary their diet they eat spiders, beetles, bugs and occasionally bees, wasps and even ants. The rest of their diet is vegetable matter and includes such wild fruits as bayberry, blackberries, blueberries, poison ivy berries and a little mast. Food is plentiful in the summer and the busily foraging chickadees are not seen as frequently as during the winter months.

During the winter, large flocks of chickadees scour the woodland in a never-ending search for food. It takes a lot of fat and protein to keep their fast metabolism going! Most of their summer fare is unavailable, At this time their diet leans heavily toward insect eggs with the eggs of moths, katydids and spiders frequently on the menu. Their vegetable matter is limited to buds and budscales encountered while searching for insects but these make up less than 25% of the chickadees winter diet during the lean months. At this time the black-caps can easily be lured to hand or to feeder that offers interesting food. The best bet is either bones with bits of raw meat and gristle, cheese, suet, sunflower seeds, breadcrumbs, peanut butter or any combination of these high energy foods. They will repay you well, for birds remaining in the area serve both winter and spring active insect predators. While their courage and unfailing notes of cheer have secured chickadees a very special place in the hearts of New Englanders.